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Sticky Arms Issue

U.S. and Soviet Can Find Little Room For Compromise on Space Defenses

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 6 — Every time the United States and the Soviet Union inch toward each other on limiting offensive nuclear forces, the path seems to get clogged by fundamental differences on space-based defenses.

That was the central message of Secretary of State George P. Shultz's meetings with Soviet leaders earlier this week, Reagan Administration officials acknowledged today.

Mr. Shultz reported Tuesday that "there was no narrowing" of the gap on arms control. Administration officials said this meant that Mr. Shultz held firm to the idea of reducing offensive nuclear forces while moving to phase in defenses against missile attacks, and the Soviet leader, Mikhail S. Gorbachev, continued to insist that offensive cuts depended on limiting defenses. Both sides have proposed a 50 percent cut in offensive weapons, but disagree on how this would be achieved.

White House, Pentagon and State Department officials further stated that they saw no sign whatsoever that President Reagan was planning to alter course, and little give on Moscow's part either. Administration officials cited the continuing White House ban against even studying possible compromises on Mr. Reagan's space-defense program, formally known as the strategic defense initiative.

Little Time for Homework

Thus, even if Mr. Reagan should decide in the next few days to explore possible compromises at the summit meeting, Administration experts say the time would be very short to do the necessary interdepartmental and expert homework for anything except a cosmetic gesture for a joint communiqué at Geneva.

"We could come up with some fudgy rhetoric for the communiqué if the Soviets would go along with that, but not much else," said a key official involved in the preparations.

Administration officials also stated that with all the public talk by Soviet officials about their willingness to allow scientific research on defensive systems, their formal position in the continuing Geneva arms negotiations remains unchanged. Moscow still calls for a halt to the "development of space strike weapons, including research," the American officials say.

If Mr. Reagan should decide to look for compromises, many officials throughout the Administration who

have been working informally have come up with these ideas:

¶ Signing a joint communiqué stating that both sides would abide fully by the 1972 treaty limiting antiballistic missile defenses, but leaving everything else undefined.

¶ Agreeing to limit Mr. Reagan's missile-defense program to "research," but seeking to define it in later talks in such a way as to allow planned testing programs to go forward.

¶ Agreeing to limit the program to "research," but trying to draw a line between permissible activities, such as tests of systems to find and track objects, and banned activities, such as the development and testing of actual weapons or their components.

¶ Seeking to limit all development and testing to subcomponents of tracking systems or weapons systems.

¶ Proposing that the two nations be able to develop and test in agreed ways, but that no weapons or systems could be deployed before one side gave notification and delayed deployment for an agreed number of years.

It is not clear that Soviet thinking has gone even that far. Thus far, Soviet negotiators in Geneva have yet to elaborate on Mr. Gorbachev's public statement that scientific research would be allowed, or on statements by other high Soviet officials that they would be prepared to draw the line between permissible research and prohibited development and testing.

A number of Administration officials said they were hoping Moscow would open up this line of negotiation as a way

of forcing the White House to lift the ban on studying possible compromises.

Recent interviews with Soviet officials in Moscow, however, suggested that Soviet experts had not done much homework of their own on how to go about translating their desire for limits on defense into negotiable treaty language. They talked mostly about declarations to prevent the militarization of outer space and of agreements to limit spending on defensive weaponry, ideas Mr. Reagan was certain to reject.

While they stated their willingness to start negotiations on drawing the line between research and other activities, it seemed that they had not thought much about exactly how to do that.

Positions on 1972 Treaty

The Administration position is that research, development and testing of defensive weapons are permitted by the 1972 ABM treaty, and that both sides should proceed now to cut offen-

sive forces and agree to develop and deploy defensive systems.

Moscow's position is that the treaty bans all forms of development of such weapons, and that it will not agree to cut its offensive forces until Washington agrees to bar all further development of space-based defenses.

To add to the gloominess about an arms control breakthrough at the summit meeting, decisions made in Moscow and Washington in recent days have given a sour turn to the pre-Geneva atmosphere.

Arms for Nicaragua

Soviet leaders chose to parade Vitaly Yurchenko, a senior K.G.B. officer who apparently defected to the United States several months ago only to return to Moscow, before the American public with assertions that he had been kidnapped by the Central Intelligence Agency. As Administration officials noted, Moscow could have arranged to bring him back home more quietly.

The Administration added its own negative signals by deciding to assert at this time that there had been a "serious increase" in Soviet shipments of arms to Nicaragua via Cuba.

Mr. Reagan himself muddled the situation further in his interview with Soviet reporters. He used this opportunity to present a wholly new version of his concept of space-based defenses, saying that they would be deployed only after all nuclear weapons had been destroyed. Previously, he had spoken of a transition period in which defenses would be phased in as offensive forces were being phased out. The White House spokesman, Larry Speakes, has now called these Reagan statements "impressions" that had been misunderstood.

Administration officials stressed that the ideas being discussed informally about compromises on strategic defense had not been looked at in any interdepartmental working group, or, to their knowledge, among the most senior officials. "We are not studying trade-offs between S.D.I. and offensive forces, or working up new definitions or figuring out how to draw lines between research and other activities," said a high-ranking Administration official.

This official and all other officials interviewed maintained that the President's position remains, as always, that the development of defenses must go forward and that he is prepared to share defensive technology with Moscow through his new idea of open laboratories and exchange of scientists.

They all said that it would be premature to go beyond this now. They all said that no judgment had been made on when, if ever, it might no longer be premature. But they all hastened to add that they did not know what was on Mr. Reagan's mind for sure.